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ABSTRACT

A substantial change in the core curriculum and general education requirements at Syracuse University provided the context for an interdisciplinary approach to encouraging foreign language study among undergraduates. A unique "continuing skill requirement" dictates that students in upper division courses sharpen and consolidate skills developed in the lower division liberal arts program. To satisfy this requirement in foreign languages, the student must complete a course in which substantial use of the language is required. Among the most common courses chosen are medieval and renaissance music, period courses in the history department, international and contract law, and journalism, as well as foreign language courses. The importance of faculty across the institution sharing responsibility for promoting languages is emphasized, and in this case, advocacy for curricular change with foreign language use at the center was the essential element of the model for promoting foreign language use outside the foreign language department. (MSE)

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PROMOTING FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY OUTSIDE THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Most students are not interested in majoring in foreign languages. Hence the shrinking enrollments in traditional, major-oriented, foreign language programs are quite understandable. Adjustments in the operation of departments in order to counter these shrinking enrollments can assume different shapes and forms. In this paper I wish to suggest two possible adjustments. The first is a recognition of the fact that students in the eighties are career oriented in terms of their educational goals and what this implies for teaching foreign languages. The second is a general proposition on the role of curriculum reform and the significance of language requirements. One possible model for using curricular reform to promote sharing responsibility for foreign language study will be suggested.

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I. The Problem

Wilga Rivers' survey, conducted at the University of Illinois at Urbana a few years ago, and repeated by Kenneth Chastain at the University of Virginia somewhat later, indicated that students want to learn foreign languages.[1] Different results were obtained in a study made at Syracuse University during 1980-81 under the direction of Professor Gerd K. Schneider. This survey revealed that the majority of 723 respondents selected

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foreign languages primarily in order to satisfy a requirement. The one exception was the group of students who chose to study Italian. Forty-five of seventy-three Italian language students indicated that they chose this language on the basis of personal interest.

Fifty percent of the students in the Schneider study wanted to use the foreign language for professional or career purposes. The single exception was the group of students studying Hebrew. Of these only four out of thirty-five wanted to use Hebrew for professional or career purposes. Most significant was the fact that only three percent (22 out of a total of 723) wanted to major in a foreign language. The recognition of this fact together with the desire of students to use the language in career related ways suggests that Departments develop dual majors with other, career-oriented disciplines as a response. Unless this development occurs, some Departments of Foreign Languages could become service departments with very few upper-division students.

One of the tragedies in American postsecondary education is the speed with which linguistic skills atrophy. For upper-level courses in the second language are often so narrow in focus and appeal that they do not attract students from other disciplines. A partial solution to this problem again is recognition of student interest and perceptions. Dual degree programs can become one solution; another is development of major or graduate programs which require a professional component.

II. Sharing Responsibility

Richard D. Lambert[2] examined the traditional arguments for foreign language learning and found them decreasingly persuasive. He then argued that appeal should be made to the desire of students to use the second language. "From this proposition, it might reasonably follow that only those who have a reasonable expectation of using foreign language skills should be required to acquire them while they are in school."[3]

A corollary implied in this recommendation is that responsibility for foreign languages must be shared with colleagues outside the foreign language department. Lambert argued that students could not be motivated to master a second language, if total responsibility for that mastery is seen as resting solely with the language department. If faculty in other disciplines are seen using a foreign language in their teaching and research, the student is likely to do as the faculty member does. "Second, it is essential that the student have an opportunity -- or perhaps be required -- to participate in a course in which the language he or she has studied is either the medium of instruction or the language of some of the assigned readings."[4] Courses of this kind communicate to students that painfully acquired skills can be used in disciplinary work, some of which may be related to projected careers.

There are many problems associated with such courses. Among them are the difficulty of arriving at equitable evaluations and the problem of departmental turf and of teaching students who are not truly fluent but still have an adequate

command of the second language. Of primary importance in solving these problems is the creation of a context hospitable to the continued learning of languages -- or rather the knowledge of languages, since perception of their importance may do most to persuade students to learn them.[5] Students need to realize that there truly is light at the end of the tunnel of second language acquisition. They need to be convinced that the ability to use the language is worthwhile. Among advantages of this approach is the fact that such contexts for language study provide for moments of second level reflection -- thinking about the process of learning while learning. When the second language is taught and reenforced in the context of a discipline one may employ assessments of skills of identifying and codifying patterns of information, of perceiving and organizing detail. These are aspects of language learning that transcend discipline boundaries. It is therefore reasonable to think about using the curriculum to effect sharing responsibility.

Curriculum is the organizational element in postsecondary matters. Curriculum establishes the environment which will either foster or hinder foreign language learning. It is a structure that conditions expectations of faculty and students alike. It makes and reconciles demands, offers choices, and determines a flow of resources. Curricular change is a shared faculty responsibility. Curricular change is also very difficult to achieve.

III. One Model of Curricular Change

An examination of the process of curricular reform at Syracuse University and the changing role of foreign languages within the curriculum will suggest one model for sharing

responsibility for foreign languages with other disciplines and professional schools.

Students who entered Syracuse University in September of 1979 inaugurated a new kind of liberal arts program: one that combined an enlightened "back to basics" approach with an emphasis on "clustering" of related subject matter in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences.[6] Many institutions have remodeled general education requirements. What was unusual in the Syracuse change was its magnitude. The 1979 entering class of over 3,600 was said to be the largest of any independent university in the nation. The "Liberal Arts Core", as the new system was called, has been recognized by major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mellon, Soling and Sloan Foundations. Syracuse University is an independent institution with a large residential campus. The undergraduate population mirrors the changing face of today's college-going population. The eleven undergraduate schools and colleges offer hundreds of different degree programs, all based in the liberal arts.

The new Liberal Arts Core distinguished between skill and distribution requirements. Basic linguistic and quantitative skills are indispensable elements in the training of any well-educated individual. The Liberal Arts foreign language requirement became part of the skill requirements. The student satisfies the basic skill requirement in foreign languages by completing the intermediate level course. Other basic skill requirements exist in mathematics and expository writing. In addition to skill

requirements the student must complete or ideally complement the skill requirements with a set of courses called a "cluster" in each of the three divisions: Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Thus a student who chooses the "Classical Foundations Cluster" is urged to complete basic skill foreign language requirements in Latin or Greek; the student in the "On Human Nature Cluster" is urged to complete the basic skill requirement in French; the student in the "Medieval to Renaissance Cluster", in Latin and Italian; the student in the "Modern Europe Cluster", in one of the European languages.

Theimportance of language study does not diminish after the student satisfies basic requirements of the curriculum. The curriculum does require that every student achieve proficiency in expository writing and in a foreign language or mathematics. Regarding the choice between foreign language and mathematics, students are urged to achieve proficiency in both. Thus far the description of general education requirements resembles many synthetic models of general education which use clusters of courses organized around ideas, temporal periods, global problems, or policy issues. What makes the Syracuse model different is the "continuing skill requirement".

After achieving the basic level of competence in skills that are necessary parts of a liberal education, it is important that the student sharpen and consolidate these skills by using them in upper division courses. To satisfy the continuing skill requirement in foreign languages, a student must complete a course in which substantial use of the language is required. This may be accomplished by taking upper division courses within the

Foreign Language Department or, and this is the moment of sharing responsibility, in courses in other departments and in the professional schools. Such courses have to be approved and are listed in the Liberal Arts Core bulletin. It is this aspect of the Syracuse curriculum that has the greatest potential for changing student perceptions about second language learning.

Typical courses approved for satisfying the continuing skill requirement in foreign languages are "Medieval Music" (French, German, Italian, Latin) and "Renaissance Music" (French, German, Italian, Latin) taught by the Fine Arts Department; "The Crises of the Seventeenth Century" (French); "Germany from Bismarck to Hitler" (German); "Russia: Time of Troubles to the Era of Reform" (Russian); "Eastern Europe 1918-Present" (French, German, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian), all taught by the History Department. In the School of Law courses on "International Law" (Romance Languages) and "Contracts" (French, German) may be elected. In the School of Public Communications, sections of the courses on "Reporting" (Spanish, French) may be elected.

A history professor who teaches such a course commented as follows:

> Ever since my coming to Syracuse in 1964, I have repeatedly attempted to convince my colleagues in the History Department that students with a serious interest in European history would derive much benefit, were they to do at least a small part of their research in the language related to their project....Even before the College of Arts and

> Sciences authorized such an option (the Continuing Skills requirement), I encourged my better students, who professed some knowledge of a foreing language, to do so. The results in almost all cases were most gratifying. Not only did the student enjoy working on his project, rather than simply producing a paper in fulfillment of course requirements, but, in several instances, the initial essay proved to be a stepping stone to more advanced work on the topic.

This professor went on to mention a student who found a sixty-page article in French which she used in a paper dealing with Polish resistance during the war. She received a prize for the paper.

Faculty, as Clifford Adelman noted,[7] will find ways to adapt to changing environmental conditions while expressing personal interests through their work. Although they may participate in courses such as those involving continuing skills in foreign languages for motives other than promoting language use, this participation involves assessment activities that can signal to students a commitment to second language learning. The potential importance of this sharing responsibility for promoting languages outside the foreign language department cannot be underestimated.

Curriculum reform can become a powerful lever for promoting foreign language study outside the foreign language classroom. What is involved is a program of advocacy for curricular change with second language use at its core. The Syracuse model is one

example of shared responsibility.

NOTES

[1] "A Pleasant Surprise: Students Like Foreign Languages," **Modern Language Journal** 58, 3 (1974), 124; Kenneth Chastain, **Developing Second-Language Skills: Theory and Practice**, 2nd ed. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976, p. 180.

[2] "Language Learning and Language Utilization", **ADFL Bulletin** 13,1 (September 1

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Humphrey Tonkin, "Language and International Studies: Closing the Gap,", **ADFL Bulletin** 13, 1 (September 1981), 17

[6] This curricular change was the first major reform in over fifty years.

[7] See Clifford Adelman, "Saving the Baby: Language Study and the New Reforms in General Education," **ADFL Bulletin**,13,2 (November 1981) 15-19.